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Abstract:

This paper offers a study of online social networking as a form of surveillance entertainment. My theoretical approach is founded in the cross field between surveillance studies, computer ethics and philosophy of technology.

Traditionally, students of surveillance have been occupied with the negative and worrying aspects of monitoring practices in society, and concepts such as Big Brother and Panopticon have dominated the literature as the metaphorical framework. There are, of course, good reasons for this focus, since the increase of computerized surveillance (dataveillance) in the latter part of the twentieth century have contributed to what some people consider to be the erosion of civil liberties and rights (cf. Gandy, 1993, Lyon, 1994). However, as surveillance studies has grown to be a broader field of research, the positive and caring aspects has come into consideration as well – notably, David Lyon (2002) has described surveillance as Janus faced, spanning from control to care. Furthermore, it has been suggested that surveillance studies should embrace the contexts of entertainment, play and leisure, and in this way, surveillance is studied as a social practice. In this approach, the object of study is as much the subjectivity of surveillance as the effects of surveillance (Albrechtslund, 2006, Albrechtslund and Dubbeld, 2005).

An interesting example of surveillance as entertainment is the numerous social software websites and services appearing in the wake of Web 2.0. Characteristic of this Internet trend is the use of voluntary monitoring of user habits and preferences in order to form an online social network. It appears that the sharing of information should not be considered a trade-off, in the sense that the user gives up personal details, thus paying a “price” in order to be granted access to other people’s online lives and to be part of a social context; rather, online social networking seems to introduce a pleasurable approach to surveillance. The self-exposure in these networks is exhibitionistic in the sense that people passionately share e.g. their thoughts (blogging software), bookmarks (social bookmarking services), current location (e.g. Plazes.com) and what music they are listening to (e.g. Last.fm), and accordingly it seems that surveillance is simply part of a leisure practice. Currently, services such as *World of Warcraft* and *Second Life* are popularizing social networking in virtual worlds and Massively-Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs), and this trend also emphasizes surveillance as something playful.

The focus of this study is surveillance as social play. Through case studies of prominent social software websites and services, I will pursue these research questions: What can we learn about surveillance through social networking and vice versa? What are the existential implications of the surveillance practices in social networking? What are the characteristics of the subjectivity taking part in surveillance as play?

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